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ABSTRACT

Much confusion abounds concerning the definitions for homonyms, homophones, and homographs. Even newer as well as older dictionaries find these terms problematic. A way out of this semantic confusion would be to introduce a new word: heteronym. A heteronym is a word that is spelled the same but has a different pronunciation like "wind" (air) and "wind" (clock). The term homonym should be discontinued, since it is old fashioned, fuzzy, and cannot be defined precisely. The definitions for homophones and homographs, when used with the definition for heteronym, would become clearer and should remain. If teachers and curriculm writers would start using these terms, all the dictionaries would fall in line. (Two tables of current definitions and suggested clarifications are included.) (KEH)

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Homonyms, homographs, and homophones: What is the difference?

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HOMONYMS, HOMOPHONES, AND HOMOGRAPHS: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

Are you confused by the definitions for homonyms, homophones, and homographs? Well relax, so are the dictionaries.

For example the Thorndike Barnhart dictionary widely used in the schools under the Scott Foresman name, would call

mail=letter

mail=armor

male=gender

all homonyms. American Heritage dictionary agrees with Thorndike, that homonyms need not be spelled alike. But the Random House School Dictionary would only call mail and mail homonyms because it defines as homonyms only words which are spelled alike and sound alike.

So much for homonyms. Isn't there more agreement on homographs? All agree that homographs must be spelled the same. Random House says that they may be pronounced the same or differently, hence both calf (leg) and calf (cow) as well as lead (pencil) and lead (first in line) would be homographs. American Heritage and Thorndike Barnhart duck the issue and don't say how they must be pronounced.

You will note, if you care to reason it out, that both homophones and homographs would fit under the homonym definition of most dictionaries. See Table 1. In fact the Random House dictionary specifically states that homophones and homographs are synonyms for homonyms. Incidentally everybody agrees that each of these three terms refers to words with different meanings.

Well there is a way out of all this semantic confusion. But first we must introduce a new word: heteronym. A heteronym is a word that is spelled the same but has a different pronunciation like wind (air) and wind (the clock). Under the confusion rampant in older dictionaries these would simply be called homographs or even homonyms. However in a newer dictionary (Webster 1988) and in a journal of Reading article by William Johnson (1988) heteronyms are defined as words that are spelled alike but have a different pronunciation. Johnson further restricts the use of the term homograph to words which are spelled the same are pronounced the same like date and date.

Homographs are words which have different origins and have separate entries in a dictionary. In fact, really the only way most people can tell the difference between a homograph and a word with multiple meanings is by looking it up in the dictionary.

Finally the real way out of the confusion is to get rid of the word homonym. It is old fashion, it is fuzzy, and it can't be defined precisely. If we do this we are then left with 3 neat words which can really be defined, explained (See Table 2) and if you wish taught:

Homophones which are pronounced the same but spelled differently. (eight-ate)

Homographs which are pronounced the same and spelled the same. (date-date)

Heteronyms which are spelled the same but pronounced differently. (wind-wind)

And of course all of these terms refer to words of different origin and different meaning.

If teachers and curriculum material writers start using these terms and using them precisely and correctly, all the dictionaries will fall in line. Interestingly enough dictionary authors don't authoritatively assign meanings they take as authority citations of use. All the advances in our culture need not come from science and technology, a little more precision in language use might help too.

Teachers have long taught some interesting vocabulary and spelling lessons using homophones and heteronyms. And just for fun they are the source of many a pun or comic picture (rein-rain). The cause many a problem for ESL instruction but that is just one of the prices we pay for the usually lovely English language. If you would like to see a big list of homophones see the New Reading Teachers Book of Lists (Fry et.al. 1985) and if you want a excellent list of heteronyms see the Johnson article in the March 1988 Journal of Reading.

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Table 1

Current confusion for the definitions of homonym, homograph, and homophone.

Term	Spelled	Pronounced	Examples
Homonym	same or different	same	mail/mail mail/male
Homograph	same	same or different	mail/mail lead/lead
Homophone	same or different	same	mail/mail mail/male

Table 2

Suggested clarification by using narrower definitions, dropping older term homonym, and adding new term heteronym

Term	Spelling	Pronunciation	Examples
Homophone	different	same	mail/male
Homograph	same	same	mail/mail
Heteronym	same	different	lead/lead